

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner June 16, 1997

Thank you. Thank you very much. Mr. Mayor, my friend and neighbor, thank you for that generous introduction and for your great leadership in Memphis. I'd like to thank all of those who made this dinner possible tonight: I thank Richard and Janice and Ernie and Bob, who aren't here, and Weldon and Mel Clarke and Marianne Niles and Bill Kirk, Larry Gibson, Marianne Spragen, Jeff Thompson, everyone else who got all of you here tonight. I'm glad to see you.

You know, when you come to an event like this, even if you've been reelected President, right before you go in you're gripped with this recurring fear that you'll walk through the door and nobody will be there. *[Laughter]* So I'm very grateful to see you all here tonight. *[Laughter]*

Let me say, too, that I'm delighted to be joined tonight by two members of the White House staff, Craig Smith and Minyon Moore. And I see Carroll Willis from the DNC. There are a lot of other people from the Democratic Committee here.

I appreciate what the mayor said about my speech in San Diego, and I thought what I would try to do tonight just for a few minutes is to try to explain how that speech came to be. And we brought a few copies here tonight. If you want one on the way out, you can get it. But I thought I would like to explain how it came to be.

In 1992 when I ran for President, I had an idea that we could make this country work again if we could liberate ourselves from kind of traditional political battles and think about what we wanted the country to look like in the 21st century and then think backward and say, "Well, what would I have to do to get it that way?" Don't say in the first instance, "Well, you can't do both those things. They're inconsistent." Just ask yourself, what would you like our country to look like in the 21st century?

And I wrote a little answer down, and I have said it a thousand times since then. And every single day I think about it. I want my country to be a country where the American dream of opportunity is alive for every person, not just some. I want all citizens to be good, responsible citizens and assume the responsibilities of citi-

zenship. I want the United States to lead the world for peace and freedom 20, 30 years from now, just like we are today. And I want us to live together as one community where we respect, we even celebrate our differences, but we're bound together as Americans.

Now, those are the things I want. And I wrote it down over 5 years ago, and I've stuck with it ever since. Way back in 1991, before I made the decision to run for President, I said—nearly 6 years ago now—I said, "No point in me running unless I've got a better reason than I'd like to live in the White House." *[Laughter]* What will I say when people say, "What do you want to do? Why are you doing this?" And every single day I think about it.

So the first thing I wanted to do was to change the economic policy of the country. I said, "We can't keep on spending all this money we don't have; we're going to bankrupt the country. But we don't want to walk away from the poor or the dispossessed or the future of the country. So we have to find a way to reduce the deficit, for example, and spend more on education and spend more on preserving the environment, because they're our children and our future."

And most people didn't think you could do that. But you can, and we did. We had to do some things that weren't so popular. We got rid of hundreds of programs that I thought we could do without. And we got rid of 16,000 pages of Federal regulations. And by attrition, not firing, the Government's 300,000 people smaller than it was. But we're spending more money on education, we're spending more money on the environment, and we've cut the deficit by 77 percent. And that's a big reason, not the only reason, by any means, but a big reason the economy has done as well as it has.

On crime and social welfare, I thought to myself, there's got to be a way to protect the children and support people in moving from welfare to work but require them to do it, if they can, without hurting the kids. And that's what we've tried to do. We've had the biggest drop in welfare rolls in the history of America by far in the last 5 years.

On crime, what I wanted to do was to deal with the causes. Anybody can make a tough speech on crime and pass one more bill raising the penalties. But it was obvious to me, having been a Governor who built more prison cells than any Governor in my State's history, that there would be a limit to how far we could jail our way out of this. There are several States that are already spending more money on prisons than they are on higher education—several States.

So I said to myself, "We can't stop being tough on people who do vicious things; you have to catch them, prosecute them, and put them in jail. But we have to stop this from occurring; we have to find a way to prevent crime." And it wasn't so hard to find because already there were people who were beginning to bring the crime rate down by going back to old-fashioned community policing and reaching out to our young people and trying to find kids something to say yes to as well as something to say no to.

And so we passed a crime bill. We passed the Brady bill. We passed the assault weapons ban. I heard all the people say I was going to take all these hunters' guns away and it wouldn't do any good. Well, no hunters have lost their weapons, but 186,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers have not been able to buy handguns. We were right about that. We're putting 100,000 police on the street. Crime has gone down every year, last year the biggest drop in 35 years.

And I say that not to be self-serving but to say, if we can get our country always to think about what do we want the country to look like when our grandchildren are our age—and we're going through a time of change, so we have to think in different ways—then I think there's a way to find good-faith solutions to these problems. And no one can seriously question that we're better off than we were 5 years ago in terms of jobs and employment, new minority businesses, biggest drop in inequality since the 1960's among working families. So I said to myself, "What do we still have to do?" because I never wanted to get a second term just to ratify the fact that I'd done a good job in the first term. You could do that with a gold watch. No one should ever want to be reelected because they've done a good job.

I remember the first time I ran for reelection—that I was successful anyway—[laughter]—

in 1984. I went out, and things were going pretty well in my State, and this guy said, "Are you going to run for reelection as Governor?" I said, "I think so," and I said, "If I do, will you support me?" He said, "Probably." He said, "What are you going to say?" I said, "I've done a good job, and we're better off." He said, "Bill, you can't say that. That's what we hired you to do." [Laughter] That's pretty good, right? You think about that. He said, "You can't brag on just doing what you were hired out to do."

So I said to myself, "What are we going to do in these next 4 years? What still needs to be done?" And I'd just like to mention three or four things and end with the initiative on race, and you'll, I hope, understand why to me we're doing the right thing at the right time.

I said, "Okay, the economy is better; welfare rolls are down; crime rate is down." Another thing that was encouraging, we just saw that our fourth graders ranked way above the national average on international math and science tests, something that I was told for years would never happen because we had such a diverse student body and our kids were poor and all that. I've listened to that for years. But our teachers and others have been out there working to get these standards up, and we finally saw it manifested in international competition this year. This is something people have been working on, literally, for 10 years, since the "Nation At Risk" report was issued, now, 13 years ago. And it's finally—you're finally beginning to see people figuring out how to give poor kids the chance to prove they're just as smart as anybody, not just in town but around the world, and prove that we can make education work.

So I said, "What else do we have to do?" Okay, one, we have to keep the economy going. The best antidote to all despair and disadvantage is having a chance to make a living, because if everybody else messes up, as long as you can make a living you can at least take care of your own.

So I wanted to finish the job of balancing the budget in a way that would continue the strategy of investing in our future. And that's why I was thrilled with this budget agreement. I didn't agree with everything in it, but after all, we negotiated it with the leaders of the Republican Party in Congress and the leaders of the Democratic Party. But it will permit us

to balance the budget, and it has literally—literally—over 95 percent of the investments that I recommended in my budget to the Congress.

It enables us to go on and invest in education and to invest in preserving the environment and invest in research and development and technology. It enables us to continue to try to grow the economy in the dispossessed areas—more than doubles the number of empowerment zones that have been so successful in some of our communities, including yours—more than doubles the number; has a special initiative for the District of Columbia that we have paid for there in there to try to get DC up and going again in a good way; has a brownfields initiative that all the mayors asked for to give private sector incentive to go back and invest in the inner cities in areas that had previously been unattractive because of environmental problems. It has—in this budget.

So I said, “This is a good thing”—has \$3 billion to give to our communities to help put people on welfare back to work if the private sector can’t pick them up. And I might add for those of you who are concerned about it, the States in this budget get the same amount of money they got in 1994, when the welfare rolls were at their all-time high, which means almost every State in America has got at least a 20 percent cushion that they can use to do things like pay prospective employers the welfare check as a wage and training supplement.

So I’d really like to see the African-American business community go out there and hit every State legislature in the country and say, “Listen, you asked for this. You got it. You’ve got to give these people a chance to work. Give us some of that money, and we will train them and give them a job and make sure they’re not hurting their kids and they’re taken care of in that way.” And that ought to happen all over this country. We are spending much, much more money on welfare today than we would have spent if the old law had stayed in place because the rolls are down by more than 20 percent. But the States have it, and they will live to regret it if they don’t spend the money now to make folks independent and put them into the workplace and put them into the mainstream of American life.

So all that, anyway, is in this budget. That’s the first thing.

The second thing I wanted to do is to emphasize two specific things in education. One of

them doesn’t cost much money. And that is, I wanted to provide funds to help the Department of Education work with the appropriate experts to develop a test that would grow right out of the ones we’re using now—we’re just not giving them to all kids—to ask every child in the country in the fourth grade to take a reading test, in the eighth grade to take a math test by 1999, based on these international standards so we could see how our children were doing, with no adverse consequences to the kids, just a way to see whether we were really challenging our children hard enough to reach the right standards.

Now keep in mind, this last international test that showed us way above the average of math and science in the fourth grade was given to a representative sample of American students by race and income and region. Nobody’s fooled with this. And what I want to do is to see every child have the chance to have the basic education necessary to succeed.

One of the things I said in my speech in San Diego—I don’t know if you heard it—applies to Hispanic-Americans, who are legendary for being willing to leave school early to support their parents in low-wage jobs that they have to work long hours at. That was a responsible thing to do 10 years ago. Today, it’s not a responsible thing to do. The high school completion rates of African-Americans and whites are almost identical. The high school completion rates of Hispanics are 25 percent lower—25 percent lower. And there is nothing all my social policies will do, nothing all my economic policies will do for any young person who is at least not willing to finish high school and get 2 years of further training. But a lot of people who have parents in need—their hearts are in there, they want to quit and go to work, help support their parents, but what happens is they get stuck in these jobs and their incomes go down.

So I’m trying to get people to focus on those first 12 years with a view toward, number one, everybody should finish and, number two, when you finish, your diploma ought to be worth something. And the only way to do it is to have high standards and not be afraid of them, and not punish people if they don’t measure up, but just show them where the bar is and then help everybody clear it.

The second thing I want to do is open the doors of college to everyone. And that’s why we proposed to give a tax credit worth about

\$1,500 a year for the first 2 years of college and then a tax deduction for any cost of higher education after that. We know from the 1990 census that every young person—not every but most young people who get at least 2 years of college or more get a job with a growing income. And young people who have less than 2 years of college or who don't even have a high school diploma tend to get a job with a stagnant or a declining income. We know that's where the break was in 1990. And we know that our economy is now producing more of the high-wage jobs. In the last 2 years—that's another thing—more than half the new jobs in the last 2 years have been in higher wage categories. So that's the second thing I wanted to do.

The third thing I wanted to do that I've got some differences in our party about—and there's a lot of differences within the Republican Party; both parties are split on this—is to continue to expand the network of trading partnerships the United States has. But we negotiated 200 trade agreements to get fair and equal access to other markets in my first term, and we're now the world's number one exporter again. And one of the reasons more than half our jobs pay above average is that so many of them are tied to exports.

Now, tomorrow the First Lady and I and others are going to announce a very important initiative with regard to Africa that we've been working on for some time and that really was reinforced by her recent trip there. But I would hope that all of you who are business people would help us to continue our normal trade relations with China and to push them on things we disagree with but to keep involved with them, and to continue our reaching out to Latin America, even as we reach out to Africa. You know, we're going to have a billion people in Latin America before you know it. And they're very excited and would like to deal with us. But last year, the southern countries in Latin America, Brazil, Argentina, and the others in a group called MERCOSUR, for the first time ever did more business with Europe than the United States. Why? Because we stopped reaching out to them with our trade agreements.

So it's not like these folks aren't going to go on to create a future, and we have a great opportunity. And if we want more high-wage jobs created so that when we educate young people they'll be able to get good jobs, we have

to create the high-wage jobs. Mr. Brown's father literally gave his life for that cause. And that is the right thing to do. That is not against working people. What is good for working people is to create more high-wage jobs in America. And so I hope you will support that.

The fourth thing that we have to face is that with all of our successes, 20 percent of our kids, at least, are still living in poverty—minority children, much higher percentages. Now, in the end, no society can permit that without paying an awesome price. And that is something, by the way, that ought to factor into this affirmative action debate, when people say, "Oh, you don't need it." You cannot leave people isolated for 18 years from the mainstream of economic and social life and then tell them, "There are no barriers to your entry into colleges, universities, or starting your own business." You cannot do that.

So the reason I thought the Presidents' Summit of Service that we did, the former Presidents and General Powell did in Philadelphia was so important is it gives us a chance to mobilize millions of people around specific objectives that I'm also trying to see the Government do its part in. And let me just reiterate them real quick.

We want to see that every child has a safe place to grow up. I've got a juvenile justice bill before the Congress now that is both tough and smart, modeled on what they've been doing in Boston where our chairman, Mr. Grossman, lives, where not a single child has been killed by a gun in a year and a half. Don't tell me you can't do that. Not one.

But do we need volunteers? Yes. Why? Because look what they did in Boston. I can pass all the bills in the world, in addition to the probation officers and police officers, to have all these people walking the streets, saving these kids' lives. And you go to any city where the juvenile crime rate is going down, they have both citizens and appropriate action by the public sector.

The second thing we want is for every child to have marketable skills. I already talked about that, education.

The third thing we want is for every child to have access to health care. And I was really appreciative of that—this is one thing that General Powell and I share a common obsession with. He said, "I can't believe we let working

families get by without health care. If I proposed to end the health care guarantee for people in the military when I was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there would have been a riot." No one in America would think about depriving military people and their children of health care. But we have 10 million kids, for example, who don't have health care. And we've got enough money in that balanced budget to cover half of them. We need to finish the job. We need to finish the job. It's not right. It's not right.

The fourth thing and the fifth thing are things that have to be done at the community level. We want every child to have a mentor, and we want every child to have a chance to serve. And I think that's important. Kids who serve feel more important; they know they matter. And 90 percent-plus of young people in a recent national poll said that they would serve in their community, even poor kids, if just somebody would ask them, if somebody would ask them and give them a chance.

So those are the things that I'm trying to get done now for our country, to keep this momentum going. But I really believe—and this brings me to the race initiative. Right now we just have one State, Hawaii, where there is no majority race. Within 3 years, California, our largest State, will be the same. Within somewhere between 30 to 50 years, depending on patterns of immigration, it will be true for the Nation as a whole. That means that we really will test whether or not we are not a nation of race or place but a nation of ideas and ideals. Politicians have been saying that in speeches for a century now—[laughter]—about to find out. [Laughter] And I don't know about you, but when we find out, I know what I want the answer to be.

Think how much time I've spent as your President and how much time I'm going to spend in the next 3½ years, dealing with hatred and mistrust in the Middle East born of ethnic and religious difference, dealing with hundreds of years of accumulated animosity in Northern Ireland born of their ethnic—originally—and religious differences, the Scotch-Irish and the Irish, the Protestants and the Catholics. How many hundreds of thousands of people died in Rwanda and how many had to be saved by us and the French and others because of the fights between the Hutus and the Tutsis? Most of us, if we walked down the street in one

of those African communities, could not tell the difference, but they knew enough to hack each other's children to death.

Or what about the Bosnians, where there is literally no biological difference between them? They are by accident of history divided because of the political forces coming together where Bosnia is now. The Orthodox became Serbs; the Catholics became Croat—or vice versa—and the people that were left in the middle were colonized by the Ottoman Empire and became Muslims. But they now are ethnically different, and people who lived together as friends and neighbors for decades turned on each other like that.

So when you think everything is hunky-dory here and, oh, we might have an occasional riot when there is a controversial thing like Rodney King, but we won't really ever have a disintegrating energy in this country, you just think about how easy it was for those people to fall on each other.

Now, I know we've got a lot more to lose, you would argue, than they do. But no great nation has ever had a multiracial, multiethnic, integrated society. The Russians are doing a good job, actually, of trying to preserve their democracy with a whole lot of different ethnic groups. And they had that unfortunate difficulty in Chechnya, but there are a lot of Chechnyas over there where they don't have difficulty. But they live apart, physically apart, and normally in distinct, what we would call, States. Here we are, together.

So I said to myself, "This would be a good time to do this because we're not having a civil rights crisis, and we're not under the illusion that there's just this X little problem—even if it's a big problem—different perceptions of the fairness of law enforcement, for example—that if we fix, everything will be hunky-dory, and we'll go on. We need to imagine what it's going to be like 30 years from now." Because if you think about it, we can have a good economic policy, a good social policy, we can even begin to do the things we need to do to rescue our children, and if we can't get along together and we don't trust each other and we don't feel that people are treated in the proper way, then the rest of it could just unravel on us somewhere down the road.

Now, that's why I did this. And do I know it will be successful? Do I know that there's some mechanical way to define success? No, I don't know that, but I think it will be.

And that's how I want all of us to see this affirmative action debate. Look, if I didn't think we needed it, I'd be happy to shed it. If somebody could offer me a credible alternative and then test it for a year or so and proved that it worked, I'd be happy to shed it. What I know is that we have a vested interest as a nation, without regard to race, in having universities where people of different backgrounds get educated together, in giving people from each different ethnic group in the United States a chance to have their fair share of—not a quota but at least a share, a representative group of people in any form of human endeavor, to inspire others to come along, to have economic self-sufficiency.

You know, if you look at why—why does the United States have an unemployment rate under 5 percent and a lot of the European countries have higher unemployment rates? One reason is people like you, small-business people, independent business people, people that proved they could put together something, hire a few people, work over a lifetime, and build something. And we have a vested interest as a people in saying that there are pockets of economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurs in every neighborhood in this country. And if we had it, we wouldn't have half the problems we've got today.

You just think about it. If every block in this country had one or two small businesses succeeding on it, there would be people on that block employed, there would be role models for those kids walking the streets to see, there would be people giving money to the school to make sure they don't have to give up their music programs. You just think about it.

So we have a vested interest, all of us, in trying to make sure we can all participate. So, to me, this affirmative action debate is somehow smaller than the larger issue. I will—I'm doing my best to honor the Supreme Court decision. I'm doing my best to have reasonable standards. I hope that there will be other things we can do as well. That's why I want the empowerment zone to double, the empowerment zones to pass. We've got a lot more economic things we need to do.

But the larger issue is, what do you want this country to look like 30 years from now? Every other question should be answered in terms of that. Once you ask the right question,

it's a whole lot easier to come to a commonsense answer.

Now, what we're going to try to do with this race initiative, just very briefly, is, first of all, stick with this vision of racial reconciliation, try to get everybody to agree on what we want the country to look like.

Second, get the facts out. Now, that's important. I think when we decide what to do with the welfare system, for example, it would be helpful if everyone in America knew that last year in Chicago there were six applicants for every minimum wage job that opened up and nine applicants in St. Louis. Don't you? I was a little concerned that over 40 percent of African-Americans and over 40 percent of whites, when asked what the percentage of the American population was black, said between 20 and 49, when the correct answer is 12. We need to know the facts.

Then the third thing we want to do is to have this kind of a dialog in every community in the country. We want to recruit and encourage local leadership.

And finally, we want to come up with some specific, concrete actions to be done at the national level and at the community level. That's what we're trying to do.

But I wanted you to understand tonight because I want you to be a part of this; I want you to feel like it's yours. And I want you to go out and find your friends and neighbors and ask them to be a part of this. And I want you to find people that don't agree with you on everything and ask them to be a part of this. Because this is a huge deal.

If we can pull this off, the United States will be by far the best positioned country in the global society of the 21st century. And if we act like we don't have to think about it until the wheel runs off, there is a chance that the wheel will run off. And even if it doesn't, we will never be what we ought to be. That is what this whole thing is about.

So I ask you, go out there and tell people—if they want to be cynical, skeptical, say, "I don't know if it will amount to anything. I don't know about that Clinton; he's got to have something to do in his second term"—whatever they're saying out there—let them say it. Tell them to participate anyway, saddle up. They don't have anything to lose by trying. I'll tell you one thing, if we all try we'll be better off

than if we just let it go. So I ask you for your help.

Now, the last thing I want you to know is—that's why I want you to be proud to be here, because I think these things that our Democratic Party stands for now are the future. I think they're not just Democratic future; they're not just African-American, Hispanic-American, you name it; this is America's future. And we're going to have to make it together. And tonight, by your being here, you're making it more likely that we will do just that.

God bless you. Thank you.

Let me say one other thing before I leave. I don't know who all was here from my office before I got here, but we've got—Bob Nash, who is my Director of Personnel, is here. If you want to be Ambassador, ask him. He has the hardest job in the Government. He has to tell one person yes and 10 people no. *[Laughter]* And Maurice Daniels, the Vice President's political division person, is here.

And let me just say one other thing, too. I want you to know, because a lot of you are friends of hers, that Hillary and I were deeply saddened by what happened to Betty Shabazz, and we've been praying for her, and I know you are, too.

That's a whole other subject, but it ought to remind us that we don't have a kid to waste.

You don't want any of them to get away from you, and they do all too soon and all too easily, which is another reason we ought to think about what we came here to do tonight.

Thank you. Bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:24 p.m. in the Crystal Ballroom at the Sheraton Carlton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Willie W. Herenton of Memphis, TN; Richard Mays, attorney, Little Rock, AR, and Janice Griffin, vice president, Prudential, cochairs of the event; Ernest Green, managing partner, Lehman Brothers; Robert L. Johnson, chairman and chief executive officer, BET Holdings, Inc.; Weldon Latham, Jr., partner, Pittman, Potts and Trobridge; Mel Clarke, president, Metroplex; Marianne Niles, president, National Association of Investment Companies; Bill Kirk, partner, Reid and Priest; Larry Gibson, partner, Shapiro and Orlander, Baltimore, MD; Marianne Spragen, president, W.R. Lazard; Jeff Thompson, accountant, Thompson and Bazilo; Carroll Willis, director, communications services division, and Steve Grossman, national chair, Democratic National Committee; Michael Brown, son of former Secretary of Commerce Ronald H. Brown; Gen. Colin L. Powell, USA (ret.), chairman, America's Promise—the Alliance for Youth; and arson victim Betty Shabazz, widow of civil rights leader Malcolm X.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner June 16, 1997

Thank you very much. Steve gave such a good speech, if I had any sense I would just sit down. *[Laughter]* But I thank you for it. Let me thank Joel and David and Monte and Jeff and Ira and everyone else who is responsible for this tonight. I thank Carol Pensky and Cynthia Friedman for their leadership in our party. I thank Secretary Babbitt for coming tonight, and Ann Lewis from the White House for coming, and Craig Smith, my political director. There may be more people here. I'll hear about it tomorrow if there are. *[Laughter]* I thank Senator Lautenberg and Senator Feinstein, Dick, and Senator Lieberman and Hadassah, thank you all for being here.

I really appreciate, more than anything else I suppose, the fact that there has been established between our administration and I hope between me personally and the American Jewish community a bond of trust which is rooted in our shared values for what America ought to become here at home and for our longing for an honorable and lasting peace in the Middle East. And I thank those of you who mentioned to me, going through the line tonight, my speech in San Diego a couple of days ago. And I would like to talk a little about that and about the Middle East in what I would call a proper context.

In 1991, when I was attempting to decide whether to enter the Democratic primaries and